

Hand In Hand

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Hand In Hand

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Summary

Within a blink, Aryana Tabonive's life had completely fallen apart. She was out in the wilderness on the run from a madman and with no idea what she's supposed to do next. Her only solace is at least she has her best friend with her.

A novelization of Baldur's Gate.

The Flag Would Have a Duck On It

Candlekeep - 1353 DR

Aryana sat in the grass in front of the gates of Candlekeep. Her father, Gorion, had been gone the entire week, leaving the young girl in the care of Winthrop. Aryana liked Winthrop, but he never left his Inn. Her dad at least would show her magical scrolls and tell her all kinds of stories (when the monks weren't dragging her off to lessons at least).

But last week he just ran off without an explanation.

Aryana was worried he might not come back. What if he'd left forever? She didn't like that thought. It made that nagging voice in the back of her mind start acting up. So after three days with no word, Aryana took to sitting out by the gate waiting for her dad to come home.

The monks always told Aryana that patience was a virtue, whatever that meant. They did not tell her that patience was also boring and frustrating. She sat in the grass, looking straight ahead. Then she rolled around in the grass for a time until she got dizzy. Then she began tearing small handfuls of grass out of the ground and flung them into the air as high as she could. Anything to not think about the waiting.

"Augh! This is talking forever!" she yelled to the skies, the guards standing atop the gates her only witness. "When is papa coming back!?"

As if the universe itself seemed bidden to answer her call, the loud scraping of the gates opening made Aryana bolted upright in excitement. The guards rushed and ran around to open the inner gates as well.

The little girl scrambled to her feet and ran toward the gate in excitement. *'Please be papa, please be papa!'* she said as she skidded to a halt a few feet from the guards. She'd been told before it was dangerous to get underfoot when they were letting someone in. She craned around the guards trying to get a glimpse of who was outside when the gates finally opened and Gorion stepped through. A little girl with pale red hair was holding his hand in a death grip, looking very frightened.

Who was that? Why was she with Papa? Where were her parents? Even more questions left Aryana bouncing on her little feet, her hands lifting high into the air. "Papa! Papa over here!" she called out. "Is me! Is Ary!"

Gorion looked up and frowned when he saw his foster-daughter bouncing in the dirt. "Aryana, you should be in your lessons right now."

"You didn't come home!" Aryana said, pouting. "You were gone a long time! So I came here to wait! I missed you!"

Gorion's frown softened. He was almost never cross or even frustrated with Aryana for long. Not when she looked up at him with her big, sad eyes. "I understand, little one, but I wasn't

going to be gone forever. You need to attend your lessons. They're good for you. You might not realize it now, but they are important."

"But I didn't know you were coming back!" Aryana argued, cheeks puffing out in defiance before her gaze turned downward. Back to the girl clutching at Gorion's hand. Oh right. "Hello," she greeted cordially, providing a rough facsimile of the greeting curtsy the monks had taught her. "I'm Aryana! What's your name?"

The girl clutched Gorion's hand and recoiled slightly.

"This is Imoen," Gorion said. "She's not very talkative right now, she's been through a lot. Please take care not to crowd her."

Aryana took a step back, tilting her head curiously. "Are you sad?"

Imoen seemed to recoil in on herself.

"She's going to be staying in the keep," Gorion said, beckoning Aryana to follow as he led the both of them toward the inn. "I want you to take care to be very nice to her."

Aryana looked down to Imoen as they walked. She looked very upset. Very... what was that one word the monks said? Distraught? She didn't know what distraught looked like, but she had a hunch this was it. Aryana didn't like that. She wanted Imoen to be happy. She wanted to make that happen for her. "Yes, papa," she said with a nod. "I'll take good care of her. I promise!"

Gorion smiled at her. "Thank you."

Candlekeep - 1356 DR

"Ary! I don't think that's a good idea!" Imoen yelled as she watched Aryana climb the rough stone of Candlekeep's walls.

"You were the one who said 'I bet you can climb that!'" Aryana yelled back down as she pulled herself up another couple of inches.

"I didn't think you would!" Imoen countered, clutching at the end of her dress in a nervous tick.

"Well, it's too late now!" Aryana called out, eying the wall for the next bit of rock to grab. In truth, even she could see that this probably was a bad idea, but that didn't matter. Imoen asked her to do it, so she did. She always did what Imoen asked her to do. Since the day they met in Candlekeep, she vowed to do whatever it took to make Imoen smile. And she wasn't about to break that promise now.

"Ary! Get down! What if you fall?!" Imoen screamed, decidedly *not* smiling. She looked around frantically for any of the monks. "You might die!"

Aryana looked over her shoulder. “But I’m almost there!” she said. “...I think. Am I almost there?”

“No, you’re not!” Imoen cried out. “Come down! Before you fall and break all your bones!”

A frown tugged at Aryana’s lips. Imoen sounded seriously upset. “...Okay! I’m coming down!”

Imoen was relieved. “Be careful! Don’t die!”

Aryana lowered her foot to one of its previous perches, but it slipped and she lost her balance. Clinging to the wall by only her fingertips, her feet scrambled for another foothold but they couldn’t find one.

“Ary!” Imoen screamed, turning around and looking for anyone who could help. “Help! Help! Ary’s gonna fall!”

“I’m okay!” Aryana called back, feet scrambling to find purchase elsewhere. But they kept slipping. And her hands were starting to slip as well. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. This wasn’t good.

“Help! Help! Someone help!” Imoen screamed, tears streaming down her face.

It was with great exasperation that Fuller, officer of Candlekeep’s Watchers, stepped out of the barracks to see what all the racket was about. He found the two children by the southern wall. Imoen was inconsolable, screaming for help and that Aryana was going to die. Aryana was clinging to a loose stone in the wall.

About two feet from the ground.

“Aryana,” Fuller regarded dryly, approaching the dangling child. “*Hanging around*, are we?”

Aryana looked at Fuller, utterly red in the face. “...Please help.”

Rolling his eyes, Fuller pulled Aryana off of the wall and placed her back onto solid ground. Imoen immediately rushed in and hugged Aryana like a vice, practically sobbing into the elf’s shoulder.

“Don’t scare me like that again!” she cried.

“I didn’t mean to scare you!” Aryana exclaimed. “You said I should climb it!”

“Yeah, but you weren’t supposed to!” Imoen said, her voice near incomprehensible between the thick weeping as her little hands clutched Aryana’s tunic as tightly as she could.

“But why did you tell me to do it!?” Aryana asked.

“I don’t know!”

Fuller rolled his eyes again. “These kids...”

Candlekeep - 1359 DR

“Ary, do you think you’ll ever marry a prince?”

Aryana blinked, placing her morning glass of milk down to look at Imoen in befuddlement.

“Do I think I’ll what?”

“Marry a prince?” Imoen asked sincerely, a bright smile on her face. “You know. A dashing, handsome stranger on horseback who whisks you away to live in his castle happily ever after?”

“I already live in a castle,” Aryana said, looking ever more confused. “And a stranger? Who marries a stranger?”

“Princess Penelope did!” Imoen argued, puffing her cheeks out in indignance. “And she became a Queen when she did!”

“Oh. Well, I don’t think I wanna be a Queen,” Aryana said with a shrug, turning her attention back to her breakfast.

“Who wouldn’t wanna be a Queen?” Imoen said. “A big castle, servants waiting on you every day, a-”

“Weren’t you just talking the other day about how you wanna leave the keep and travel everywhere?” Aryana asked. “Now you wanna go to another castle?”

“It’d be a new castle!” Imoen huffed. “Not like this dusty old one filled with nothing but books! And I’d be a Queen! I could make all of the rules! Make it so everyone has cake for breakfast! All the guards have to wear pink! The flag would have a duck on it!”

Aryana giggled, sitting forward on her chair. “What about the kingdom?”

Imoen cocked her head, looking befuddled. “What about it?”

“What kind of kingdom would it be? Farming? Mining? Is there nobility or do the peasants get to direct their own lives?” Aryana asked.

There was a long stretch of silence, Imoen’s eyes darting back and forth. “Uuhhh...”

“You didn’t listen to any of Brother Cadwell’s lectures about state structure, did you?” Aryana asked knowingly.

“...I’ll be the Queen, that’ll be someone else’s job!” Imoen scoffed.

Aryana snickered. “You’ll be overthrown and beheaded in a week.”

“No I won’t!” Imoen yelled, pushing against Aryana. “I’ll be an amazing Queen! And besides, my darling husband wouldn’t let them overthrow us anyway! He’ll fend them off and execute the traitors for ever raising a finger to me! So, nyeh!”

“Well I don’t see a prince or a husband in my life,” Aryana shrugged. “Girls are prettier anyway.”

Imoen opened her mouth to argue, but no words came out. Slowly, she closed it again as she silently chewed on Aryana’s words. “...Actually, yeah, you’re right,” she conceded. “Girls are prettier. But a kingdom can’t have two Queens, can it?”

“Well, then, you call it a Queendom,” Aryana said without missing a beat, her quip earning a genuine laugh from Imoen. One of her favorite sounds always was Imoen’s laughter.

“Actually I think they just call that a drow city,” Imoen giggled.

“I think the elves have a Queen,” Aryana said. “Ellesime I think her name was.”

“Oh yeah,” Imoen said, looking down at her breakfast. She mulled over thoughts of Princess Penelope, the drow, the elven Queen, and Aryana. Then an idea struck her. An idea so brilliant she couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it sooner. “Hey! What if *we* got married?!”

Aryana blinked, looking at Imoen in puzzlement. “...Us?”

“Yeah! What if we married each other!?” Imoen asked, grinning ear to ear at her perfect plan.

“Hmm...” Aryana’s brow furrowed slightly as she gave Imoen’s question some thought. Her fingers drummed pensively against the table. In truth, Aryana never really gave much thought to the very idea of marriage before this conversation started, let alone who she would marry. “...Well, we still wouldn’t become Queens since neither of us are royalty.”

“We’d build our own castle!” Imoen grinned. “Or take one graciously offered to us after we saved the kingdom!”

“Hmm... well maybe-”

“Imoen!”

Both girls blinked, whipping their heads around to see a very cross looking Winthrop behind the bar counter. “Girl, I told you to bring your mugs back down from your room when you’re done with them! Now I have no mugs to give to customers!”

Imoen winced. “Sorry Puffguts...”

Aryana giggled. “You’re in trouble!”

Imoen scowled at Aryana before swatting her incessantly on the shoulder.

“Hey! No manhandlin’, Imoen!” Winthrop chided. “Don’t need you stuntin’ her growth!”

“I’m not stuntin’ her growth! She’s already tall!” Imoen frowned, going for another slap before Aryana grabbed her by the waist and pulled her into a hug. She squawked, wriggling weakly in Aryana’s grasp. “Bwah! Help! She’s crushing me!”

“I’m not crushing you, you doofus!” Aryana giggled, squeezing tighter. “I’m giving you a hug!”

“Puffguts! Help!” Imoen rasped. “Can’t... breathe... life... flashing before... my eyes.”

Winthrop’s frown faded at the sight of the two girls and he let out a chuckle. “Let her go, Ary. Sh’needs to bring me mugs back down.”

“Okay,” Aryana smiled, pressing a kiss to Imoen’s cheek before letting go of her.

Imoen gave a dramatic gasp as she pulled away, looking affronted at Aryana. “You dare try to squeeze the life out of me!? Your only friend!?” she demanded with exaggerated shock, pulling herself to her feet. “Monstrous! Monstrous, I say! See if I ever marry you now, brute!”

“Love you too, Immy!” Aryana beamed.

Candlekeep - 1368 DR

Aryana was having a miserable morning. The monks had awoken her at the crack of dawn with an urgent message from her father. She had been given a small amount of gold and told to equip herself for a long journey without any other explanation. Neither the monks nor Gorion would give her a straight answer, and left her to figure out what she needed for the road by herself.

“It’s so cool!” Imoen exclaimed. “You’re getting to leave the keep! I’ve always wanted to do that!”

“We’ve left the keep tons of times,” Aryana said as she tested the draw on a shortbow. “Remember that time we went camping and you had a screaming nightmare fit?”

“Well I-”

“Or the time we went skinny dipping in the river?”

“Keep your voice-”

“Or the time we ran into a pack of gibberlings and they thought you were their Queen?”

“...Okay, that was a good day,” Imoen said with a slight giggle. “But that’s not what I mean. All those times we were a half a day away from the Keep at most! But now! You’re leaving to Gods knows where! Maybe Gorion’s taking you on one of his Harper adventures! The kind we have to keep begging him to tell us about! Oh, by Mystra! You’re gonna come home with a dragon’s head tied to your belt!”

Aryana frowned as she drew a longsword from the rack. The thought of being gone from the keep for so long troubled her. She didn't share Imoen's thirst for adventure. All those stories they read as kids Imoen saw heroic battles, daring escapes and promises of romance. Aryana saw the lessons warning against greed and aspirations without virtue. Sure, the walls were stifling when she was a child, but more and more she found the stability comforting. Leaving wasn't on her list of aspirations.

Especially since she and Gorion were leaving alone. Without Imoen. Over the years, Imoen had become Aryana's only real friend. The monks and mages of Candlekeep continued to view her with increasing indignance as she got older and the two of them got into more mischief. And Gorion had become increasingly cagey with her. Imoen was her only real friend, and if she was being honest with herself she wasn't sure why.

"I don't think it's an adventure," she said. "If it was, he'd be taking you. You're the one who always wanted to leave."

Imoen hummed thoughtfully, though Aryana did not miss the way her eyes utterly lit up for anything. "Yeah. I guess you're right. I don't suspect anything especially exciting will happen on this trip then. Definitely shouldn't let me tag along or anything. Nosirre. Definitely shouldn't even ask him if I could come."

Aryana smiled and laid a set of studded leather, a longsword, a shortsword, two shortbows and two quivers of arrows onto the counter. "If that's the way you want it, Immy."

Imoen smiled, shifting on the balls of her feet as she looked at all of Aryana's new gear. "You're certainly not leaving anything to chance. Has Gorion told you anything about where you're going yet?"

The smile dropped from Aryana's lips. "No. But when has he ever told me anything?"

Imoen's smile faltered slightly. Unbeknownst to Aryana, Imoen had picked the lock on Gorion's bedroom early that morning. No nefarious reason, of course. She simply wished to practice her lockpicking skills. She'd found a note on his bedside table from a wizard named Elminster. It detailed a lot of things about potential danger and had information about Aryana that both surprised and worried her. Despite her carefree attitude, she knew that when Aryana stepped outside those walls that she was never coming back.

The thought, the urge, to tell Aryana what was going on was palpable against her tongue. To free her best friend from the ignorance that she loathed to be under, thanks to Gorion. After all, this was probably the last time they would see each other. And yet, even as the window of opportunity hung open in front of her, she couldn't help but pull a page from Gorion's voice and stay quiet.

"Maybe he finally will," she said softly, stepping closer and giving her a tight hug.

Aryana sighed, her colder disposition swiftly melting in Imoen's embrace. She could never stay angry or upset for too long when Imoen was hugging her. She certainly tried at times. "Mmm, maybe," she said warmly, squeezing her tightly before pulling away. "Thanks, Im.

I'll be sure to write to you as soon as I can. Maybe even send you something nice. A pure silver lockpick if I can find it."

"Awww, you're sweet," Imoen grinned, giving her a very tight squeeze before letting go.

Aryana smiled and reached out to grasp Imoen's hand. "Thanks," she said. She plucked the armor, the longsword and one of the bow and arrow sets off the counter, leaving the other and the shortsword. "Those are for you," she said. "You know... just in case something happens."

Imoen looked at the weapons for a moment before giving a chuckle. "Wow, paranoid much?" she asked with a smirk, nonetheless reaching out and accepting the weapons. "You're sweet, Ary. I'll keep them close in case anyone tries to give me lip. Just make sure to do the same with your gear, yeah?"

Aryana nodded as she slipped the leather cuirass over her head and started tying it closed. "Promise," she said softly. "Meet me at the gate to see me off?"

"Ppfft. Of course!" Imoen said, delivering a soft jab to Aryana's shoulder. "If you think I wouldn't, you're crazy."

Aryana's smile widened as she slung the bow over her shoulder. "You're the best."

She and Imoen parted ways at the door, Imoen going to finish the last of her chores before Aryana left while Aryana headed for the central library. Gorion stood at the entrance waiting for her. Aryana had to take a deep breath before approaching him. This was it. Her life was probably going to change forever after today. She had no idea if she would ever come home, if she would ever *know* a home again, or if she would ever see Imoen again. It filled her with a palpable dread, and with that dread came the creeping mutterings again.

Since she was little, Aryana had always had intrusive thoughts. Pessimistic thoughts that always tempted her to break the rules or do bad things. When she was little she briefly mentioned her 'shoulder devil' to Gorion, who had become quite alarmed. His reaction was so visceral that Aryana never broached the subject with him again, afraid that she'd done something bad.

She hadn't needed to anyway. Since she and Imoen had become friends, her shoulder devil had grown very quiet. It was only when she was alone that they came back, and she was rarely ever alone after Gorion brought Imoen to the keep. She and Aryana had been inseparable, only being apart when they went to sleep. And even then Imoen had a habit of crawling into her bed anyway.

Now with the unknown stretched before her and not knowing if she would ever return, they were back in full force. Nastier than ever.

"Dad?" she said. "I'm ready..."

"I see," Gorion said, nodding subtly. "Good. The journey is long and we must be prepared for whatever we might encounter."

Aryana nodded, even though the vagueness in her father's words were already eating at her. "Don't suppose you can tell me what's going on?"

Briefly, Gorion looked towards the gates as they began to open. Her query prompted a moment of deliberation. A spark of hope flustered in Aryana's chest. Was this it? Would she get the full truth for once?

"...I'm sorry, my child. Not yet," he said, predictably, stripping the wind instantly from Aryana's sails. "Once we safely reach our destination, we can speak freely. But not before."

Aryana frowned. "Once we reach our destination... then you'll tell me everything?"

"Come," Gorion said, ushering her toward the gates.

That was a no, Aryana thought. It wasn't enough for her father to uproot her entire life, he didn't even have the courtesy to explain why. *'Cryptic old fool, treating me like a slave.'* She winced and stomped that thought down. No. Gorion wasn't a fool. There had to be a reason he was so secretive.

...Right?

"...Could we take Imoen with us?" she asked as they stepped out of the library's gate and toward the entrance to the keep.

"I'm afraid not. It would be too risky," Gorion said with an air of finality. "I promise this will all make sense later, Aryana. You just have to trust me in the meantime. Can you do that?"

'Can I?' Aryana thought, not entirely knowing the answer to that question. She wanted to, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong about all of this. And Gorion refused to give her a straight answer as always. Did he even trust her?

"...I can," Aryana nodded, more by force of habit than anything.

They approached the gate, and to Aryana's delight she saw Imoen waiting for her. Gorion spotted her and frowned, glancing at Aryana questioningly.

"I just asked her to see me off," she said. "Honest."

Gorion didn't say anything but nodded in concession. Aryana smiled and rushed forward, sweeping Imoen into a hug and spinning her around.

Imoen cooed as she squeezed Aryana back with just as much gusto. "Mmm! I'm gonna miss you," she said softly. For Aryana's ears only.

"I'm gonna miss you too," Aryana whispered, turning her head to kiss Imoen's cheek. "I love you, Im."

"Love you too, Ary," Imoen said, rising to the tips of her toes to kiss the crown of Aryana's head. Her warm smile lingered, even as she turned her attention to Gorion. "...You'll keep her safe, right, sir?"

Gorion nodded. "Of course I will," he said, patting Aryana on the shoulder. "Now come along, child. It's time to go."

Aryana winced, clutching onto Imoen even tighter. Now, more than ever, she didn't want to go. She didn't want to let Imoen go. She didn't want this to be the last time she would ever hear her voice.

"Now," Gorion said firmly.

Aryana very reluctantly let go of her and let Gorion pull her away toward the gate. She kept her gaze fixed on Imoen the entire way through, the two of them waving goodbye to each other until the gates closed on them one last time. And just like that, it was only her and Gorion. For the first time in fifteen years.

"...Where are we going?" she finally asked as they set out onto the road.

"North," Gorion said quietly. So quietly that Aryana almost didn't hear him. "To the Friendly Arm Inn. I have associates there we can trust."

Aryana perked up slightly. "Auntie Jaheira?" she asked.

Gorion allowed himself a small smile. "And here I thought you had forgotten her."

"Never!" Aryana exclaimed.

When she and Imoen were little, a friend of Gorion's had visited Candlekeep more than once. An elven woman with thick braids and an even thicker accent. She was harsh and stern, but at the same time very gentle with the two children. Aryana had called her Auntie Jaheira once, much to her chagrin. Eventually she stopped visiting, but Aryana always kept Jaheira in her memories. It was easy to remember people when you met so few of them.

"Yes, Jaheira is one of them," Gorion confirmed. "She is part of the Harpers and can help us."

That brightened Aryana's mood a little bit. Not enough to get over the dread of never seeing home again, but at least she knew there would be some reprieve.

"Okay," she said. "Okay that's good at least."

They traveled for most of the day, more than Aryana had ever traveled before. They even passed by the creek she and Imoen had gone swimming in years ago. She smiled when she saw it. That was a good day. One of the few times they had been able to get out of the Keep and do something fun. As they got further into the wilderness and dark started to fall, Gorion became more visibly worried. Darkness meant danger, he'd always told her. Traveling at night was always a poor decision. Best to make camp and keep a low profile. So why weren't they making camp?

"We're getting closer," Gorion said. "If we keep this pace, we should make it before sunrise. Stay close and do keep up, Aryana."

“Shouldn’t we stop to make camp, Father?” Aryana asked, brow furrowed. “Traveling while it’s this dark is dan-”

“Staying put for too long is even more dangerous,” Gorion interjected firmly. “We have to keep going.”

“But Father, you always said-”

“Shh,” Gorion said, reaching a hand out to silence her. He looked around the treeline, listening intently for something. “...Something is wrong... we are in an ambush.”

Aryana’s eyes widened and began darting around to try and see what Gorion was talking about. Alas, the cover of night was thick. Making anything out was difficult.

Then, as though fate reacted to her blindness, the moonlight pierced through the dark clouds above. With that light, she saw one figure step out from the treeline. Then another. The both of them were utterly armed to the teeth and looking very unfriendly. She took a reflexive step back, her hand darting for the hilt of her longsword. Just as she began to force down the panic and try and think, another figure stepped into the light. This one was big. Very big. Easily standing a full head over Gorion at least. Adding to his mass was a rather grizzly looking set of armor complete with a helm that appeared to be a skull. From beneath that macabre helm, Aryana could swear that she saw glowing yellow eyes.

“You are perceptive for an old man,” the figure said, drawing closer to Gorion and Aryana. “You know why I’m here. Hand over your ward and no one will be hurt.”

Aryana’s blood ran cold. *‘Hand over your ward.’* They were after... her? Was this why Gorion hurried her out of the keep?

Aryana was suddenly very relieved that Gorion hadn’t allowed Imoen to join them.

“I will be doing no such thing,” Gorion said firmly, the air around him suddenly buzzing. “You lot will only get one warning. Lower your weapons and you may leave unharmed.”

The figure chuckled, and it became immediately apparent to Aryana that he had no intention on letting anyone be ‘unharmed.’ “I’m sorry you feel that way, old man.”

Before he could even twitch, Gorion snapped his fingers and conjured several mirror images of himself, all of which were shimmering with additional spells. Another snap and Aryana felt herself grow very warm. She looked down at her hands to find they weren’t there. She was invisible.

“Run, child! Get out of here!” he commanded.

Aryana’s heart stopped in her chest. “But-”

“Do as I say!” Gorion snapped, light bursting from his extended palm and striking one of the incoming assailants square in the chest. “I’ll join you shortly! Now go!”

She swallowed the lump in her throat, commanding shaking legs to do as he commanded. She turn and ran as fast as she could. Away from the fight filling her ears. Away from those who meant her harm. Away from her father. She glanced back only once, just in time to see the armored man plunge his weapon into Gorion's belly. Grief, confusion, anger, and fear all roiled within her, and she could do nothing but keep fleeing. Past the stones, past the trees, back out into the road.

Aryana stumbled out of the clearing, sprinting as fast as she could. She had to keep running. Had to get away. She barely acknowledged the tree branches whipping her in the face as she passed into the forest. She had to keep running. Had to keep moving. Those things had torn Gorion apart, she shuddered to think what they'd do to her.

That man's voice was etched into her mind. "*Hand over your ward.*" They were after *her*. Wherever she went wouldn't be safe. She had to keep moving. She couldn't stay in one place too-

She yelped as she burst out of the trees and onto the road, colliding with another traveler. There was a scream and they both fell onto the dirt road. "I am so sorry," she stammered as she hoisted herself into a sitting position. Then she froze when she saw a familiar head of pale red hair.

It was Imoen.

"Ary?" Imoen's eyes widened with recognition, relief pouring from her expression. "Ary! It's you!" Without another word, she surged forward, and pulled Aryana into a bone crushing hug.

Aryana's head was spinning, equal parts bemused, terrified, and overjoyed. Imoen was here. She wasn't alone. But Imoen was no longer safe. What was she doing out here!? She had killers after her. Imoen shouldn't be here. But... she was so glad she *was*. Her arms tightened around her childhood friend, her face buried in the crook of her neck. As the adrenaline of the previous night wore off, and Imoen's arms held her steady, she broke down into a fit of sobs muffled into Imoen's tunic.

"Ary?" Imoen said, now considerably more worried. "Ary what's wrong?"

"...He's dead," Aryana whimpered.

A beat of silence passed before Imoen tightened her grip. "...I know," she said quietly, nuzzling against Aryana's hair. "I heard the commotion when I came to find you both. By the time I got to the clearing, Gorion was already-" She cut herself off with a shiver, her eyes clenching shut. "I am so sorry, Ary," she whispered.

Aryana clutched Imoen tighter. The thought that she was actually out there... "What are you doing out here?"

"I came after you," Imoen said, a hand trailing softly up and down Aryana's back. "I know I probably shouldn't have. I know Gorion would have thought I'd only slow you down. But... well, it's too late now. Neither of us can go back. So the best we can do is stick together."

Aryana convulsed, another sob escaping her. Imoen was right. They couldn't go back. Candlekeep was so secure because their barrier to entry was knowledge. Without a unique tome or artifact for the monks to archive, Ary and Imoen were locked out. They had nowhere to go.

Aryana had spent the entire night counting her sole blessing that Imoen was still safe in the keep. But now that she was here... she was so relieved she didn't have to do this alone.

"I love you, Im," Aryana whispered.

"I love you too, Ary," Imoen said, squeezing Aryana as tightly as she could. "It... it'll be okay. We'll figure something out. So long as we stick together, we'll be okay. Right?"

Aryana desperately wanted to believe that, but all of those mercenaries were armed to the teeth. If Gorion couldn't stand up to them-

She lifted her head as she remembered Gorion's words from earlier in the day. "We should go to Friendly Arm. Auntie Jaheira is there."

Imoen's eyes widened. "Auntie Jaheira? Really?"

"Yes," Aryana nodded. "Gorion said we'd be safe there and... and that he'd tell me everything once we were." Her head dropped back down, nausea rolling in her stomach once again. She felt dangerously close to throwing up.

"He still didn't tell you anything?" Imoen asked, standing up and taking Aryana by the hand.

"No he didn't," she said, allowing Imoen to pull her to her feet.

Imoen felt a knot twist in her stomach. She wanted to just tell Aryana what she'd read in Gorion's study, but seeing her so distressed gave her pause. She didn't want to add to that distress. There would be a better time. Yes, definitely a better time.

"...Well we can't change the past, so let's get moving to the Inn!" she said, putting on a smile and patting Aryana's hand. "I'm not gonna let you wander around out here all alone! Never let a friend down, no ma'am!"

Despite herself, Aryana managed a smile. "No you haven't," she agreed weakly. With a deep breath, she pushed herself up to her feet. Strain caused her legs to wobble slightly, but she pushed through it.

Imoen smiled and hooked her arm into Aryana's. "Alright! The only way to go is this way," she said, pointing down the road away from Candlekeep. "Let's go!"

Aryana nodded, wiping the dried tears from her cheeks as she swallowed down another pitiful noise. She wasn't going to give into despair. Not yet, at least. Gorion did all this to try and keep her safe. He died for that goal. She wasn't about to let his efforts be in vain. The sorrow would have to wait. She thought back to that night. To those glowing eyes that regarded her so maliciously. In the dark, surrounded by those who wished her harm, they filled her with terror. Now, their memory filled her with blood boiling rage. She didn't even

know these men, and they murdered her father. Aryana was certain of one thing now. She *will* have revenge. She would make them pay for taking her father away from her. Her arm tightened around Imoen's as she looked down at her friend with a resolute smile.

With Candlekeep forever closed to her, Imoen was all she had left. And she would make absolutely certain that nobody would separate them.

Assassins Right at the Door

It was nightfall when they reached Friendly Arm, a fortified keep on the road between Beregost and Baldur's Gate. Aryana and Imoen had heard of it before. Being the closest place to Candlekeep, it was always their first stops on maps whenever they would plan out their adventures as children. It was just like Imoen's storybooks, where the first stop would always be a distant tavern to meet friends on their noble quest. Now they actually *were* going to meet friends there. Life's cruel little jokes.

Aryana was ready to drop. She'd been running the entire previous night, and had an early morning the day before. It had been about thirty hours since she last slept. Imoen was just as exhausted, but her cheeriness never seemed to fade. Aryana was grateful for that. Imoen's joy was infectious, and her excitement at finally going on an adventure of her own at least helped keep Aryana from dwelling on Gorion.

"*This* is the Inn?" Imoen asked, balking at the sheer enormity of their destination. "This... this is distinctly a Keep! Like, literally a Keep! You see this too, right Ary?"

"I do," Aryana nodded wearily, the sight before her almost blurring in her vision. Fuck she was so tired. "I think this used to be a castle before they made it into an Inn... or something."

Imoen continued to look at it in awe and confusion for a moment longer. "Huh. Well, I guess we won't have to worry about ambushes here, at least. Come on! Let's get something cushy beneath our butts. My legs are killing me."

As they made their way up the steps to the Inn, a man in a mage's robe stepped out of the shadows and approached them. "Hello there!" he greeted, his smile and disposition decidedly friendly. "A moment of your time, please."

Aryana paused just shy of the penultimate step, a slight frown tugging at her lips. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"I should hope so. One of you wouldn't happen to go by Aryana, would you?" the Mage asked, eyes darting between her and Imoen.

Aryana bristled and slipped her arm out of Imoen's. Her drowsiness was swiftly forgotten as the hairs on her neck stood on end. This was bad. After just escaping one ambush, she wasn't keen on being friendly with anyone. "No, never heard that name before."

The Mage's smile waned slightly. "Oh, are you sure?" he asked, taking another step forward. "I was told to expect her here at the Inn. You didn't cross anyone on the way here?"

"*This might be Khalid,*" Aryana thought. She steeled herself and shut that thought down. No. Khalid wouldn't be here without their Aunt Jaheira. "No we didn't," she said, her hand resting on the hilt of her longsword.

The smile dropped completely, the mage's head drooping more. "Oh, what a shame," he said with a tut. "I guess I'll just have to wait for her a little longer then."

Aryana and Imoen both shared wary looks, hands flexing at their side with growing nerves.

"In the meantime," the mage continued, his eyes narrowing and his hands suddenly crackling with magic. "I can just practice my aim on the two of you."

Aryana drew her longsword, but before either he or the Mage could actually make a move, there was the snap of a bowstring and an arrow firmly lodged itself in the Mage's throat. Their attacker staggered back, his heel catching against the step causing him to fall backwards. Aryana and Imoen both heard a sickening crack as the back of his head struck stone. There was barely a gurgle or gasp as he ultimately fell limp.

Aryana gaped for a moment, her gaze slowly turning to Imoen. She was glaring daggers at the mage's corpse, her bow held aloft and her arrow hand pulled back. Once she noticed Aryana looking at her, the glare was wiped off her face and replaced with a cheery smile. "Hey look at that!" she said. "I was quicker on the draw!"

"Uh... yeah," Aryana said, visibly dumbfounded. After an entire day of fighting gibberlings and wolves on the road here, she perhaps shouldn't be as surprised to see Imoen ready to put an arrow in someone's throat.

But that glare...

The sound of clacking metal suddenly filled her ears, causing her hackles to rise. She turned in time to see two armed guards scaling the staircase for them. "Halt!" one of them bellowed. "You two! You brought violence and death in this place of sanctuary! Explain yourselves!"

"This man attacked us, sir," Aryana said, sheathing her longsword. "He asked about us and then claimed he was going to use us as target practice."

The guard's eyes narrowed from behind his helm, turning his gaze to Imoen who only nodded in agreement. "It's true. I saw him raise a spell in hand at my friend after threatening us both. I had to take him out," she said resolutely.

The guard's exchanged looks, ultimately nodding. "...You are not known troublemakers," one of them said, sheathing their swords. "So we will take you on your word this one time. Cause any more trouble here and you will face the consequences. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" Imoen grinned, hooking her arm into Aryana's and pulling her further up the stairs. "You got it! Nothing but the goodest girls here!"

Aryana followed after Imoen, thankful for her friend's fast thinking initiative. Leave it to Imoen to act first even with the ache of travel deep in her bones. It certainly wasn't something she was expecting. Imoen was... actually kind of incredible.

"Thanks," she said as they stepped into the Inn. "For saving my ass. Both times, I mean."

At that, Imoen giggled. “Ah, all in a day's work,” she said almost dismissively. Almost. “The Sun rises. The Sun sets. I pull your ass out of danger. What else is new?”

Aryana smiled and her eyes began to water and she swept Imoen into another hug, spinning her around.

Imoen squeaked, then broke into a fit of laughter. “Ahh! Ary! I’m getting dizzy!” she said in weak protest, utterly breathless with giggles.

Aryana couldn’t contain herself. This was the worst day of her life, and yet Imoen had her grinning so hard it was becoming painful. She set her friend down and smiled at her. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Well…” Imoen held up a book. “Swiping that mage’s spellbook certainly isn’t on that list.”

Aryana blinked her gaze flicking between the woman still in her arms and the dead mage being carted off by the guards. “Wait, really? When did you-?”

“Ah ah ah!” Imoen tutted, wagging a finger in front of Aryana’s nose. “A burglar who explains her methods is no good burglar at all.”

Aryana laughed. “Fair enough,” she said, kissing Imoen’s cheek again.

Imoen giggled softly. “Someone’s affectionate today!”

‘I have to be,’ Aryana almost said. *‘If I’m not focusing on you and how incredible you are, I’ll think about Gorion and the hell we’ve been through since we stepped out of Candlekeep.’* She wanted to say it, but she couldn’t. Voicing such thoughts would make them real, and she wasn’t ready for them to be real yet. Instead, she said, “That’s true. I must be *really* tired.”

Imoen’s smile softened and she stepped away from Aryana, though she kept a hand on her arm. “Why don’t we look for-”

The sound of a clearing throat drew their attention. They looked up to see a half-elven woman with pale brown braids approaching them. Behind her, a half-elven man clad in chainmail.

“I almost didn’t recognize you,” Jaheira said, laying a hand on Aryana’s shoulder. “Where is Gorion?”

Aryana’s eyes widened in recognition. As did Imoen’s. “Oh my gods! Auntie Jaheira!?”

Jaheira blinked, blindsided by the greeting before scowling slightly. “Ah. I had nearly forgotten that… awful little nickname,” she said, her accent thick with displeasure.

Aryana’s smile faltered as she laid a hand on hers. “...Dad’s gone,” she said. “We were… ambushed on our way here.”

Jaheira’s expression sobered, her pupils shrinking. “Oh. Oh by Sylvanas,” she whispered, her grip on Aryana’s shoulder tightening. “I am so sorry, Aryana. That… must have been terrible

for you.”

“Tr-Truly horrifying,” Jaheira’s companion said. “Are... are you two okay?”

“We’re alive, that’s the important thing!” Imoen said cheerfully, clapping a hand on Aryana’s shoulder. “But truth be told, I am *beat* .”

“I can only imagine,” Jaheira said. “Come, let us get you both a room. We can talk more once you’ve rested.”

Aryana nodded gratefully, wondering if she’d collapse the moment her head hit the pillow, or if paranoia would leave her sleeping with one eye open tonight. Admittedly, the presence of Jaheira’s unnamed companion wasn’t easing her nerves. “I’m sorry. Do I know you? I don’t recall Gorion mentioning anything about a second ally.”

“K-Khalid,” he said, holding a hand out to her. “I’m your Aunt’s h-h-husband.”

Jaheira groaned. “Don’t you start...”

Aryana blinked, genuine surprise stalling her for a moment before she accepted the hand. “Oh! I see. I hadn’t realized Jaheira had married. A pleasure to meet you.”

Imoen gasped, her eyes practically sparkling. “We have an uncle!?”

“Oh! Now look what you’ve done,” Jaheira scowled, glaring at her meek yet unapologetic husband.

“I-I don’t see a problem here,” Khalid said sheepishly. “I’d say the pre- the prefix of Auntie suits you, my love.”

“Of course you would say that...”

Jaheira paid for a room for the night, containing three beds and two wardrobes. She also passed the night guard a gold piece to linger by the door in case more assassins came through. True to her own suspicions, Aryana was out like a light the moment she laid down. Khalid had left to fill their packs with supplies for the road, leaving only Imoen and Jaheira awake in the room.

“Assassins right at the door,” she sighed. “I am sorry, if we had known we would have waited for you outside.”

“Ah, it’s alright. Things have been decidedly going un-according to plan since this whole thing started. I’m just glad I was there to waste the sucker. If he managed to get the jump on Ary...” Imoen trailed off, shoulders hunching at the thought.

Jaheira frowned. Even in self defense, ‘*waste*’ was never a good way to describe death. In truth, this carte blanche attitude Imoen had assumed was concerning. Perhaps the long treks and constant dangers frayed on the young girl’s nerves? Perhaps. “I’m glad you were there as well. Gorion had good sense to bring you along.”

“Oh, he actually didn’t,” Imoen said, smiling sheepishly. “It was just him and Ary at first. I snuck out of Candlekeep later to find them.”

Jaheira’s eyes widened. “That is certainly dangerous for a child, Imoen.”

Imoen frowned. “A child? I’m the same age as Ary! Besides, she’s been my best friend since forever. If her life was going to take her beyond Candlekeep’s walls, then that’s where I go, too.”

Jaheira startled slightly. Imoen’s disposition seemed to bound back and forth between cheerful and sharp at the drop of a hat. A sign of immaturity, she thought. But given how much Aryana was grinning despite having just lost her father, perhaps her cheeriness wasn’t entirely innocent. “...I meant no offense, Imoen. The both of you are still children to me,” she said. “I only meant that Aryana was forced to take on this danger. You were not.”

Imoen’s lips pressed into a thin line at that. For a moment, she considered truly confiding in Jaheira. Telling her what she knew. Alas, the question was stomped down the moment she heard a sleepy coo from Aryana. If there was a chance she would wake up and hear them, then it wasn’t the time. “Yeah. I suppose I had a choice in the matter,” she conceded, though her tone was no less resolute. “And I chose Aryana. And I will continue to choose Aryana. That’s just the way it is.”

Jaheira smiled. Imoen’s single-minded devotion to her friend during such a difficult time put the growing worries out of her mind. Of course, she should have seen it sooner. Aryana had lost her father, been attacked multiple times, and left trudging through the wilderness at night. Imoen had been putting on a brave face to keep her spirits up. And judging by how much Aryana was smiling in her presence, it was working. She laid a hand on Imoen’s shoulder. “Your devotion is admirable, Imoen,” she said softly. “Get yourself some rest. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

“Sounds good,” Imoen said, a typical grin returning to her face. “Night, Auntie Jaheira.”

“And I’ll thank you to stop calling me that,” Jaheira said chidingly.

Imoen pouted childishly. “Aww, but we love you!”

“You haven’t seen me since you were children,” Jaheira countered dryly. “Now go to bed.”

“Aww. Yes, Auntie,” Imoen said, her grin positively unapologetic.

Jaheira shook her head and stepped out of the room, giving Imoen the chance to change. She closed the door behind her and let out a soft sigh. She hadn’t expected to be left with Gorion’s wards in her care. This complicated things. Gorion had told her little of his child. That she was in grave danger and had to be kept in the keep for her own safety. She knew, of course. She had been there on the raid on Bhaal’s temple when Gorion had taken the child before it could be sacrificed. She knew what Aryana was. Imoen, on the other hand, was a mystery. She had simply been in Candlekeep with Aryana on one of her visits, and Gorion hadn’t explained any further. Her first thought had been that Imoen was a Bhaalspawn as well, but she swiftly abandoned that notion. The girl was alarmingly cheerful and sunny and

composed, a far cry from Aryana, who was far more haunted by the night's events. She was practically clinging to her friend for support.

And now with Gorion gone, there was the question of what to do with them. Jaheira had no idea what Gorion was planning with their escape, and now they were left aimless.

"How are they?" Khalid asked, looking at his wife with an underspoken concern.

"They will live to see the morning," Jaheira said, shrugging. "Aryana is still deeply shaken by Gorion's loss. Whatever his plans were for her, I don't see how we can see it through."

She descended back down to the dining hall and returned to her and Khalid's table.

"So we should have a plan-a plan of action for when they wake," Khalid said, cupping his chin in thought. "We still-still have business in Nashkel, do-do we not?"

"Yes we do," Jaheira nodded. The Iron Crisis was sweeping the Sword Coast, along with a rampant increase in bandits. Blacksmiths couldn't make sturdy weapons anymore, and what weapons could be made were being swiftly broken in fights with highwaymen. Jaheira and Khalid had agreed to investigate Nashkel to find the source of the iron problem.

"We should b-bring them along," Khalid said. "G-Get them out of immediate harm's way, get them some experience on the r-road, and word has it the mines are infested with k-kobolds, so they'll get some experience with a w-weapon without too much danger."

"It would be an excellent learning experience for them," Jaheira nodded in agreement. "Even so, we would do best to be vigilant. Whoever killed Gorion is still out there and I doubt they'll be any lenient with us. We must prepare them for the worst as quickly as possible."

"A-Agreed, my love," Khalid nodded, taking her hand and squeezing it.

Tension released from Jaheira's shoulders as she squeezed Khalid's hand in turn. He always knew how to calm her nerves. Suddenly, the journey ahead of them seemed just a little less daunting. "...Perhaps we should retire for the evening ourselves," she said giving him a warm smile. "We'll need our rest if we're going to wrangle those two vagabonds into respectable adventurers."

"Y-Yes, we should," Khalid nodded.

"Come, there's one bed left in the room," Jaheira smiled. The two got up and retreated back upstairs to their room. However, when they stepped inside and lit a small candle, they found that there wasn't a single empty bed. There were two. "Where did-" Jaheira's question stopped when she noticed that Aryana and Imoen were snuggled up in the same bed. Clinging to one another like woodland rodents in the trees. From the way Aryana had rolled over, it seemed like she had woken up when Imoen went to bed. Despite her earlier display of leadership, however, Imoen was snuggled into Aryana's chest.

"Oh," Khalid blinked. "Oh, I hadn't realized that the two of them were..."

“They’re not,” Jaheira said, shaking her head. “At least, I don’t think they are. Gorion never mentioned such a thing.”

“Would- Would he have?” Khalid asked.

Jaheira’s lips pursed at the question. In truth, she wasn’t sure. Certain details tended to get lost in Gorion’s ongoing pursuit for the big picture. In the end, she could only shrug

Khalid shrugged in turn. “We can always ask in the morning,” he said.

Jaheira nodded and doused the candle. “That we can.”

Aryana woke up some time in the middle of the night, after a violent dream about Gorion, Candlekeep, and death. The kind of dreams she used to have when she was little, returning more vivid than ever before. The sounds of screams and magic and death gave way to silence as she stared up at the ceiling, only the sounds of crickets and Imoen’s breathing remaining. She tightened her arms around Imoen. Her presence helped ground her and remind her she was awake. With at least some sleep, she was now feeling a bit foolish at how she acted earlier, practically coveting Imoen in her fear and exhaustion. She had perhaps gone a touch overboard.

By the Gods, did she really pick her up and spin her around in the middle of town? After she just killed a man and pilfered his corpse? What the hell did that say about herself?

She shook the thought out of her head, instead opting to focus on Imoen’s breathing and the gentle sound of crickets outside. She was awake. She was calm. She was... safe, to an extent. She probably wouldn’t stay safe for long, especially with how blindly they were wandering through whatever they needed to do. But that was a problem for the morning. For now, she could just enjoy this. Right?

Imoen stirred and lifted her head from Aryana’s chest. “Ary?” she mumbled. “You awake?”

Aryana winced. Great. She fussed so much that she woke Imoen. “Yeah, sorry. Didn’t mean to wake you,” she whispered apologetically. “Go back to sleep, Im.”

“You didn’t wake me,” Imoen yawned, laying her head back down. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Aryana fibbed. “Just a n- Just an intense dream.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Imoen mumbled.

Aryana shook her head. “Nah. There’s nothing to really talk about. Thanks though.”

“Mmmkay,” Imoen mumbled, nuzzling into Aryana’s neck.

The gesture brought a small smile to Aryana’s face as she rested her chin atop Imoen’s head. This was nice. This was grounding. “Night, Im.”

“Nashkel?” Aryana asked.

“Yes. Kahlid and I have already agreed to speak with the town’s mayor about the troubles in their mines,” Jaheira said. “We could certainly use the extra hands to aid us, and traveling in a larger group will make it less likely for you both to be ambushed.”

Imoen hummed, sipping her mulled cider. “Hmm, I like the sound of that. Would this make us Harpies like you two?”

“Harpers, Imoen. And no,” Jaheira said flatly. “It takes years of training and dedication to become a Harper.”

“*Boooooooring*,” Imoen huffed, slumping down in her seat, prompting a giggle from Aryana.

“No-Now Imoen, there’s no need to be childish,” Khalid said chidingly. “Being a Harper is impo- is an important duty that must be- must be taken s-seriously. That much training and dedica- dedication is necessary! If that- if that is to high a barri- a barrier of entry for you, that’s not the Harper’s fault.”

Imoen smirked and elbowed Aryana. “I got Uncle Khalid sputterin’.”

Aryana giggled again.

“Don’t flatter yourself, young one,” Jaheira said dismissively. “He always sputters.”

“Jaheira!” Khalid huffed.

Aryana chuckled and sat up straight. “Nashkel sounds like a good idea, Auntie Jaheira,” she said.

“I’m glad you think so,” Jaheira smiled. “We’ll get you some hands on training with those weapons on the road there. Bandits crawl all over the roads these days.”

The smile on Aryana’s face faded at that, her gaze turning down to her untouched cider. “...Like the ones from the other night?” she asked, seemingly to herself.

Jaheira shook her head. “No. That was an assassin. Someone who specifically wanted you dead. Bandits are different. They want your money. Your life they simply don’t care about at all one way or another.”

“Oh. I see,” Aryana said, inhaling deeply and holding that breath before letting it out slowly. “...The monks always taught us that the presence of bandits is preceded by the presence of inequality.”

“Well, there is plenty of that to go around,” Jaheira nodded. “This inexplicable iron shortage has left several cities along the Sword Coast in a sorry state. It is why the Harpers are having us look into it. One we find the source, these widespread criminal bands should cease to be altogether.”

Aryana and Imoen nodded and finished their tea. “Anything else before we head out?” Aryana asked.

Jaheira leaned forward in her seat, her gaze fixed on Aryana’s. “Only this. You have my word, Aryana, that once this is done, the man who killed Gorion will see justice. Balance will be restored.”

Aryana smiled weakly. Imoen had done a fantastic job keeping her spirits up, but after a good night’s sleep she was fixated on Gorion’s death with a clear head. And out of the whirlwind of feelings stoked by the thought of the man who murdered him, one stood out stronger than all others: Vengeance. She knew she was far too green for it, but she wanted to find that man and put a blade in his innards for what he’d done. She wanted to hear him scream in agony before she delivered the killing blow. She wanted-

A squeeze to her hand jolted her thoughts back to the present.

“Ary?” Imoen prompted, brow pinched with worry. “You okay.”

Aryana just looked at Imoen for a moment, uncertain whether to be honest or reassuring. Her gaze flicked to Jaheira and Khalid. There were too many eyes on her. She couldn’t get into this now. Not in the middle of the Inn. “I’m okay, Im,” she nodded, rising to her feet. “Just... last two days have been a lot to take in. I’m just processing it.”

Imoen nodded and leaned in, kissing her cheek. “Okay,” she said, giving her hand another squeeze before letting go.

A smile returned to Aryana’s face, if only slightly. Leave it to Im to keep her from getting too deep in her own head. “C’mon, then. We’re burning daylight and we have a lot to learn.”

“A moment,” Jaheira said, holding up a hand to stay their departure. “Settle a curiosity for me.”

“Sure thing,” Aryana smiled. “What is it?”

“Are the two of you... involved?” Jaheira asked.

Aryana blinked and glanced at Imoen. “Uh... no?”

“Are you asking me a question?” Imoen scoffed. “No we’re not.”

“Ah. I see,” Jaheira said. “Your pardon. But with how you both clung to each other like marsupials in heat last night, I could only assume.”

“Marsupials in heat-!?” Aryana balked, her jaw dropping. “We did not!”

Imoen giggled. “It was a rough few days, Auntie Jaheira. And we’ve always been like that.”

“Very well,” Jaheira said, kneeling down to grab her druid’s staff and hoisting it over her shoulder. “I appreciate you satisfying my curiosity. Now, let us be off.”

Hit Me When My Back Was Turned

The four of them arrived in Nashkel the next morning. The Amnian guards eyed them warily, and ushered them along the road. The town was small, and deeply rural. It had sprung up rather quickly to support the mine, and with the mines in disarray the village was already showing signs of decline.

“Yeesh, this is Nashkel?” Imoen said as they passed by the tavern. “What a dump.”

“They have fallen onto hard times, which is why we are here, Imoen,” Jaheira said curtly. “Please be respectful.”

“The state- The state of affairs is indeed concerning,” Khalid said, his gaze roaming over the despondent village.

Aryana glanced at villagers as she passed by. Most of them were women and children. The sheer absence of the miners only filled her with dread. If the mines weren’t outputting, shouldn’t they be home? Something must be very wrong. The company stopped before one building that was grander than the rest. Not that it meant it was especially grand itself, but it nonetheless stood out. “And we’ll find the mayor here?”

Jaheira nodded. “Why don’t you speak to him?” she said. “It would be good for you to not just follow my and Khalid’s lead all the time.”

Aryana nodded in agreement. On the road to Nashkel, Khalid and Jaheira had given the two of them crash courses in how to use their weapons, with far more practical experience than the Monks had ever offered. It was clear Jaheira wanted them to reach a point of independence. They didn’t know how long they would be together, after all.

Imoen was already a natural with a bow. Guiding her on the path to improve her accuracy and her speed was perhaps the easiest part. Aryana, by contrast, needed to adjust to the weight of steel in her hands and how best to carry it. She was a little rigid and awkward in the midst of battle, but in her Jaheira nonetheless saw the potential for a fine warrior. A Ranger, perhaps.

Aryana approached the door, taking in a deep breath as she prepared herself for the discussion to come. Only for the door to swing open the moment she reached for it and a man on the other side to jolt slightly at their sudden proximity.

“Oh, um, hello,” Aryana greeted professionally, clearing her throat. “We are... here to speak with the mayor.”

“You... have found him,” the mayor said. “Berun Ghastkill. What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“We’re here about the trouble affecting the mines,” Aryana explained.

Ghastkill perked up and glanced at Jaheira. “Ah, you must be the Harpers!”

Jaheira nodded. "Khalid and myself are, yes. Aryana and Imoen here are merely our companions.

The mayor's relieved smile faltered slightly as he looked back to Aryana. "...You are not of the Harpers, yet you speak for this group?"

Aryana blinked, admittedly uncertain of what to say before she simply settled on, "...Yes."

Ghastkill's eyes flicked back and forth between Aryana and Jaheira. "...Fair enough," he said. "Here's the trouble. The iron coming from the Nashkel Mine has been turning up severe impurities. You've probably noticed it yourself. Weapons are breaking faster than they can be replaced. Furthermore, the miners haven't returned, and the guard sent to reinforce the mines haven't reported back. I want you to go in there and investigate. Kill the ones responsible if you have to, just get us some damn answers."

"Doesn't seem like you're hurting for more guards," Imoen said, gesturing to the armed men patrolling down the road. "You can't send them to investigate?"

"Them? Oh, they're not the town guard," the Mayor said. "They're Flaming Fist mercenaries. We hired them from Baldur's Gate to defend the town while we try and figure out what is going on with the mines. I can't afford to keep them guarding us forever, though. So time is of the essence."

"We'll handle it, sir," Aryana said.

"Sir?" the mayor's eyes widened before he smirked at Jaheira. "I like her."

Jaheira gave a noncommittal sound and nodded. "We shall make for the mines, post haste, mayor. Is there anything else we should know?"

"Yes. There are rumors that there are kobolds in the mines," the mayor said, glancing at the four of them. "Nothing that you shouldn't be able to handle, you seem well equipped. But just be warned, you may encounter a swarm or two."

"Understood. Thank you, sir," Aryana nodded. "We will be back when the job is done, rest assured. She turned to face the rest of the group. "Alright, team! We have our assignment! Move out!"

The other three all arched their brows at her.

"Move out?" Imoen snickered. "What are you, a Sergeant now?"

Aryana frowned, her face flushing with embarrassment. "...Let's just get to work, yeah?"

"Aye aye, my Captain!" Imoen said, giving Aryana an exaggerated salute.

With an annoyed grunt, Aryana marched down the road, the others following after her.

"Not bad, Aryana," Jaheira commented, walking in step with her. "Although I would work on making your speech sound more natural. A leader who looks like they're trying too hard

seldom ever inspires confidence.”

Aryana recoiled slightly. “Sorry.”

“And stand up straight, you’ll hurt your back like that.”

Aryana straightened her back. “Sorry.”

“And stop apologizing.”

“Sorry.”

Imoen snickered, gently nudging Khalid with her elbow. “She used to do this all the time with Gorion and the other monks. You could get her stuck in a loop. It was really funny.”

“N-Now Imoen, th-that’s not something to j-joke about,” Khalid said as Jaheira lead them back toward the road.

“Oh alright,” Imoen said with an exaggerated sigh. In lieu of more banter, she reached into her rucksack, pulling out a rather sizable tome. The one she pilfered from their attacker at the Friendly Arm Inn. She sifted through the pages as they walked, narrowed eyes aiming to make sense of the text within.

“Is that a spe- a spellbook?” Khalid asked, brow raising slightly. “Imoen, I hadn’t realized you were a- were a mage.”

“I’m not,” Imoen said, her eyes scanning through the instructions for a simple projectile. “Took this off the guy who ambushed us outside of the Inn. Think I *could* be a Mage?”

“You certainly could if you so- so choose,” Khalid nodded. “Most try to learn while they’re- while they’re young, but- but it’s never too late to learn.”

Imoen grinned brightly. “Maybe I could cure some deadly disease! Or maybe I could learn to one day walk the Planes!”

“That’s it!” Khalid encouraged.

“Or maybe I could turn Ary into a frog and keep her in my pocket!”

Aryana looked over her shoulder, brow furrowed. “What about me in your pocket?”

“You could be my little frog, Ary,” Imoen said with a wide grin. “We would travel the world together! I would bring justice wherever we go thanks to my unstoppable magic powers, and you would eat little leaves and bugs on my end table!”

Aryana only looked more befuddled but ultimately shrugged. “Okay. If that’s what you want, Im.”

Imoen gasped. “Really?!”

Aryana shrugged. "Sure. If you can figure out how to turn me into a frog, you can turn me into a frog."

Imoen squealed in delight, jumping in the balls of her feet. "You're the best, Ary!"

"Thanks, Im. You're sweet," Aryana said, cheeks warming at the praise.

They arrived at the Mines several hours later to find that the suspicions had been correct. The mines were overrun with Kobolds, and the guards outside were cut off from the guards inside. There was just no time to send reports back to the village while the situation was continuing to worsen. The guards let the group through, eager to let someone else take the beating from the filthy little beasts for a change, and they descended into the mines, carving through kobolds the entire way.

"These things are like rats, just bigger," Aryana groaned, wiping blood off her sword.

"And can wield weapons," Imoen said, delicately jabbing at one kobold with the toe of her boot. "Any clues why they're here yet?"

"I suspect we'll have to travel deeper inside to find out," Jaheira said. "They're dug in here like ticks."

Aryana stepped closer to one of the carts and looked inside. It was filled with iron. Likely impure iron. She picked up a piece and looked at it. She hadn't seen much raw ore in her time, but something about the ore looked strange. It seemed to shimmer in the dim lights of the mine.

She ran her thumb over it and it came back with a smear of something silvery. "...Hey Jaheira?"

Jaheira walked over to the cart, eyes narrowed. "This is the iron?"

"Looks like it. Is it just me or is something... off about it?" Aryana asked, holding the lump of ore out to her.

Jaheira accepted the lump, palming it for a moment as a pensive hum rang in her throat. "...You are correct. I cannot fully explain it, but there is something wrong with this ore. As though it has been... tainted."

Aryana held up her thumb, showing the smear of liquid. "I think this might be the culprit, though I'm not entirely sure what it is," she said.

"I think you're right," Jaheira nodded. "Take some samples. We'll have to get these to a smith who can understand what has happened here."

Aryana nodded and wrapped a few lumps of ore in cloth and set them into her pack. "We should try to find a vial of what they're using here. Without it we're just bringing in more tainted ore."

“Understood. Odds are we might find a container of this somewhere,” Jaheira said.

A clatter from nearby caused the entire party to flinch, all of them readying their weapons in the direction the noise echoed from. Imoen nearly loosed an arrow when they saw a figure step out from the darkness. They were humanoid, but too tall for a kobold. They were thin, gangly even, and wearing rags utterly ruined in dust and grime.

“Please, don’t strike!” the man, a miner, begged. “I just... I need some water! I’ll keep working! I just need some water, please!”

Aryana waved her hand to Imoen to lower her bow and stepped forward. “Sorry,” she said, holding out her waterskin. “We’re here investigating the kobolds. We don’t care if you keep working.”

The miner’s eyes widened, shock and a glimmer of hope shining in his weary eyes. “Truly?”

Aryana nodded, placing the waterskin into his shaking hand. Convinced, the miner brought the waterskin to his lips, taking big, desperate gulps of water. When he came back up for air, he seemed to laugh and sob with relief. “Oh, bless you, child! Bless you!”

Aryana smiled when she saw the relief on the miner’s face. “The way back toward the entrance should be clear. You can get to the surface safely.”

“Oh, child, you are a gift from the celestials above,” the miner said before breaking out into a coughing fit. “B-But you must be careful! These Kobolds and their masters will kill you if you go any deeper!”

“Thank you, sir,” Aryana said. “I’ll be careful, I promise.”

The old man hobbled past Aryana and towards the exit. On his way out, he would reach out and take the hand of Jaheira, Khalid and Imoen alike, thanking them profusely for their kindness and wishing them luck. They all smiled warmly and gave him reassurances that they would be alright. Imoen kept waving goodbye until he finally stepped out of sight. Afterwards, she turned and gave a fond look to Aryana. “Oh, you are just the sweetest woman alive, you know that?”

Aryana’s cheeks flushed. “I just gave him some water, Im...”

“Well yeah, but you could have just as easily told him to piss off and get out of our way,” Imoen said as she walked up to Aryana and hooked both her arms into the free arm. “Kindness, even simple kindness should be appreciated when it can.”

Aryana’s brow furrowed. “I mean I guess, but you have to be going out of your way to be that cruel,” she said.

“For giant balls of sunshine like you, maybe,” Imoen said with a giggle before rising to her toes and kissing Aryana’s cheek. “But some people find cruelty much much easier.”

Aryana blinked owlshly. “...You feeling alright?”

Imoen's eyes darted about briefly. "...I mean I am a little creeped out by this mine and trying not to think about the roof collapsing on us while we're unawares, but beyond that I'm fine."

Aryana chuckled and patted Imoen's arm. "Alright. But let's maybe not roll out the red carpet for every random act of kindness."

"Okay, but that just means I'm going to absolutely smother you with praise on those special acts of kindness," Imoen said with a giggle. "You have been warned."

Aryana laughed. "You're so saccharine, I swear."

"I have been told," Imoen said before pulling away. "Alright, where to next?"

"Well, the miner warned us from going in deeper and he came from that direction," Aryana said as she pointed to a woefully lit tunnel. "I'd say that's our best bet."

Aryana marched on, the others following after. Before Imoen could get far however, Jaheira placed a hand on her shoulder, pulling them both to the rear.

"What was that?" Jaheira asked, her voice almost too low to hear.

"What was what?" Imoen asked.

"Aryana gives a man some water, and you're lavishing her in praise like she's Selune herself," Jaheira said.

Imoen frowned, her shoulders hunching slightly and her eyes flickering between Aryana and Jaheira. "...I just want to encourage Ary to keep being nice on this journey. Like... it's a rough world out here, you know? I don't want her to lose sight of what's important."

"You seem convinced that she's at risk of losing sight," Jaheira said, her eyes narrowing. It was then that Imoen decided that she didn't like Jaheira's eyes. They were too perceptive. Too sharp. "Why?"

Imoen glanced at Aryana and then back at Jaheira. "Look it's... it's not important, I just... read some letters of Gorion's and... I'm concerned about my friend is all."

"Letters of Gorion's?" Jaheira asked, eyes widening. "What did they-!?"

"Not here!" Imoen hissed, clamping a hand over Jaheira's mouth. The older woman was looking at her aghast and decidedly angry, but she didn't care. "Look, just not here, alright?"

Jaheira rolled her eyes and nodded.

Imoen pulled her hand away. "Thank you," she said. "Alright, we'll talk about this some other time. For now- oh she's getting too far now, Ary wait up!" she exclaimed, rushing after Aryana.

Aryana turned around to see Imoen and Jaheira dashing forward to catch up. She shared a look of confusion with Khalid. "Everything alright?"

“Yes, we’re fine,” Jaheira nodded. “We were simply watching the back for a potential ambush and fell behind.”

Aryana frowned. “There must be something in the air, you’re both weirding me out today.”

Khalid grimaced. “W-Well. W-We are in a- in a mine filled with-with-with tainted ore,” he noted. “Breathing this in can-can’t be good for us.”

Aryana looked back down at her pack with the tainted ore. “I’m not sure, the miners wouldn’t be so lucid if this stuff was airborne.”

“I’d rather not- not risk it. Perhaps we should try and be- be expedient,” Khalid said, his hand clenching tightly around the hilt of his sword.

“I agree, Darling,” Jaheira nodded. “The sooner we are out of this foul place, the better.”

Aryana pulled her sword out of the throat of a gnoll with a sickening squelch, watching it fall to the ground and scatter its belongings. The sheer amount of blood spilled in this mine was starting to turn her stomach, and yet at the same time she felt strangely exhilarated. *‘Must be the adrenaline,’* she thought as she stooped down to pick up a strange bottle. She uncorked it and poured a little of its contents into her hand. A strange, silver liquid tipped out into her hand. The same sort of liquid that was all over the ore.

“Jaheira,” she said. “I think I found something.”

Jaheira was at her side in a beat, her eyes fixed on the bottle in Aryana’s hand. “Ah. So we can say for certainty that what has happened to the ore was not a natural phenomenon.”

“Certainly doesn’t seem like it,” Aryana said, shaking her head as she placed the cork back on the bottle. “So this would explain what’s wrong with the Nashkell mines, but...”

“But?”

“But didn’t you say iron was going bad all over?” Aryana asked. “I mean, the entire sword coast doesn’t get their iron just from Nashkel, do they?”

“No, but Nashkel iron does travel quite far,” Jaheira said. “It’s almost impossible to truly source where the iron in a sword has come from. Poisoning a mine is like cutting an artery. The only question is how are they doing it...”

Aryana looked back down at the liquid in her palm. She raised it to her nose and sniffed it. No scent. It was almost like metal itself. She thought back to all those times she was in her lessons back at Candlekeep. If there was knowledge about metal poison it had to have been there. But what kind of metal could do this to other-

Her eyes widened. “Gallium.”

Jaheira blinked. “Pardon?”

“The monks told me about it. They had entire lectures on metallurgy. Gallium. Alchemists make it,” Aryana explained. “It’s corrosive to other metals, especially steel. And it takes a while to start taking effect, which would be why nobody noticed it right away. Let it sink into the ore, then when the ore is smelted into steel that steel is useless.”

“Oh yeah!” Imoen exclaimed. “I remember that lesson! We watched the monks try and mold a sword with that stuff but it like shattered the instant the metal cooled down. That was nuts!”

Jaheira’s frown only deepened, as did the crease in her brow. “That means that this iron shortage was not only deliberate, but also completely premeditated. The amount of planning that goes into something like this is absolutely meticulous.” Her gaze turned downward, towards the corpses that littered their wake. “Well beyond the schemes of gnolls and kobolds.”

“That miner did mention a leader,” Aryana explained. “And there’s no way that they’re working alone. Someone’s bringing gallium into this mine. And he said deeper was more dangerous, so deeper is where we’ll find our culprit.”

“Alright,” Jaheira said as she adjusted the fasteners on her leather braces. “Lead on, Aryana.”

Aryana smiled and stowed the bottle of gallium into her pack. “Guess those lessons with the monks weren’t completely useless. Feel stupid for complaining about them.”

“You’re telling me,” Imoen said with a dry laugh. “Now I’m just thinking of what other mind numbing lecture we’re gonna get functional use of.”

“My bet’s on Alaundo’s Prophecy,” Aryana laughed.

“Ha! Yeah!” Imoen laughed, far more nervously. “Sure! I mean... if that ends up being the case, I’ll eat my spellbook! Haha!”

Jaheira gave Imoen a deadpan stare, lasting until they heard a commotion just outside the room. Kobold gibberish from the sounds of it. But more frenzied. Panicked. It was clear by now that they had enemies in the mines and they were getting deeper.

“Weapons up,” Aryana said, picking up a shield off one of the gnolls. “Let’s go.”

They pressed deeper, through increasing numbers of kobolds and spiders. They had to stop more than once to treat a poisonous bite or two, and their stock of healing potions and antidotes was growing thin as they made it to the base of the cave, where a river circled around an artificial grotto. Inside they found exactly what they had expected. A hideout, stocked with weapons, racks of potions, and a table laden with documents. At the center of it all, a single mage.

Slowly, tremulously, Aryana approached. His back was turned to her. If she was fast, if she was accurate, she could run him through within two heartbeats. Put an end to this operation he was found right in the middle on. The urge was tantalizing, yet unsettling. She had killed,

yes. She was covered in her kills from just today. But she had never killed a man with his back turned to her. And she wasn't about to start. Not today. Her grip tightened around the hilt of her sword before she hit the flat of it against her shield, announcing her presence to this mage.

He spun around with a flinch, eyes wide with surprise for but a moment before they narrowed in suspicion. He took account of all four of them, annoyance and contempt clear on his face.

"Tazok must have dispatched you, and my traitorous kobolds let you pass, didn't they?" the stranger asked. "Oh, by Cyric, I knew I could not trust them! Armed as such, you have obviously been sent to kill me!"

"Kill you? No," Aryana said. "Arrest you? Yes. You're at the heart of this kobold nest and you have all the gallium that's been poisoning the iron."

The stranger blinked owlily. "How did you know it was-" he quickly composed himself. "Oh very well," he said. "I'll come quietly. My documents are all on that table over there," he said, pointing to the table behind him.

Aryana's brow raised in surprise. Oh, he was surrendering. That was fortunate. No doubt he realized it would be pointless to resist or deny anything knowing they made it all the way down here past his small army. With an assured stride, she advanced, her eyes set on the desk and the sheets of parchment spread across.

Imoen smiled at Aryana, already proud of her for settling this so easily. But that smile was wiped off her face when she saw the stranger raise his mace behind her back. "Ary watch out!" she exclaimed, already nocking an arrow and firing.

Khalid and Jaheira, having also dropped their guard at the stranger's surrender, were snapped awake by Imoen's scream.

Aryana shot straight up, hearing Imoen's call, a pained scream right behind her, and then something hard and sharp striking her right in her back. She crashed into the desk in front of her, blunt force and sharp pain sapping the air from her lungs. She heard more yelling and the sounds of battle behind her. At least, she thought she did. Her heart was suddenly hammering in her ears, drowning everything out. She reeled back, spinning around to see the mage grunting and flailing against her allies. Arrows stuck out of his back and shoulder. A spell crackling with rage and murderous intent flew from his hand and collided angrily against Khalid's shield. Jaheira was advancing, curses spewing from her lips as her blade arched through the air, hungry for the mage's flesh.

She had to get up. She had to help them. But fuck her back was on fire. Did his mace break something?

Imoen rushed around the mage, putting another arrow in his leg as she skidded to a halt at Aryana's side. "Ary! Ary, are you okay?"

"I think so..." Aryana winced, reaching a hand up to where her back was struck. "Can't get back up though..."

“Oh, Gods!” Imoen winced, hands shaking slightly before she placed one on Aryana’s knee. “Uh, okay! Okay! Don’t move! We’ll get Jaheira over to you soon! Just hang tight, okay?”

Aryana groaned and looked up in time to see the mage, or priest perhaps given he mentioned Cyric, fall to the ground after having his head smashed in by Khalid’s shield. “He surrendered and then hit me when my back was turned...”

“Yeah, he did,” Imoen said with a frown. “Lying bastard.”

Jaheira closed the distance between them, hands already weaving magic through the air. “Alright, Aryana, keep still, alright? This might feel weird.”

Aryana felt a sudden burning in her back. The kind not unlike when the monks would wash her wounds with salt water. She felt something snap back into place and she was able to move again, albeit she was still sore.

“Thanks,” she said, as Imoen helped her to her feet.

“You’ll need rest to fully recover, but we can get moving,” Jaheira said. “Imoen, collect the scrolls off the desk.”

“Got it,” Imoen nodded, turning to grab fistfuls of parchment and stuff it in her bag.

Aryana rubbed at the back of her neck, a sense of embarrassment replacing the now absent pain. She looked at the Harpers, shame twisting in her gut as she did. “I’m sorry about that,” she said. “It was a lapse in judgment. It won’t happen again.”

“There is nothing to be ashamed of Aryana,” Jaheria said, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Accepting surrender is noble. Just don’t let your guard down. The fault on that front is ours as well. We were similarly lax. Imoen was the only one still on guard. We owe you an apology, not the other way around.”

Aryana blinked, Jaheira’s words blindsiding her. She had expected criticism for her carelessness. To be thoroughly enlightened on where she went wrong and what she needed to do to improve. She expected... well, she expected one of Gorion’s lectures. Not an admission of fault and an apology. “Oh. Okay,” she said minutely.

“I got them, Auntie Jaheira!” Imoen said.

“Put them in your pack, and let’s get going,” Jaheira said, helping Aryana step around the body. “The guards can come down to collect the corpse.”

The four of them shuffled out of the grotto and back up the mine. As they walked, Aryana felt a hand enclosing hers and looked up to see Imoen smiling at her. “How’s your back?” she asked.

“Sore,” Aryana sighed. “But I’ll be fine. Thanks... for looking out for me. That’s the third time you’ve saved my life.”

“Hey, no!” Imoen said with a frown, holding a finger up. “Don’t do that! Don’t keep count! We’re not keeping score. I got your back. You got mine. This isn’t a competition. It’s teamwork.”

“I wasn’t keeping score, Im,” Aryana said with a soft smile. “Thank you. For coming after me. I’d be lost without you.”

A smile returned to Imoen’s face. Carefully, she draped an arm around Aryana’s shoulder. “Don’t sweat it, Captain,” she said with a cheeky giggle. “I’ll gladly do it again and again. Besides, pulling your ass out of the fire makes me look good. Everybody wins.”

Aryana laid her head against Imoen’s shoulder. “Im...”

“Hmm?”

“You lead.”

“Got it!” Imoen smiled, bracing Aryana and helping her walk out of the mines.

You're Gorion's Daughter

The four returned to Nashkel bruised and battered, but otherwise alive. And carrying more intel than any of the Amnian guard had been able to acquire.

"Gallium..." Berrun said quietly, looking at the vial Aryana had procured. "Eats away at steel. Devious trick from a devious alchemist."

"I know," Aryana said. "Unfortunately all I know is what it is. The monks never taught about countering it."

Berrun's gaze turned up to Aryana, a gentle, understanding expression on his face. "You've given us more than what we had before you arrived, Aryana. That's not something to dismiss. Now that we know what the problem is, we are that much closer to finding a solution. I will speak with the smithies and alchemists we have and spread the word of this nefarious practice these fiends are caught up in."

Aryana nodded and pulled out the scrolls as well. "There's more. We found the priest's documents. They included letters from someone named Tranzig, and they detailed that this organization has a contact in Beregost as well."

A wistful sigh escaped the mayor's lips. "That makes an unfortunate amount of sense. Iron makes have been going bad all over the coast. This goes deeper than any of us have feared." He took another breath to keep himself calm. "I cannot ask you to do any more than you have, Aryana. But if you are committed to helping the people through this crisis, then Beregost would benefit from your services."

Aryana nodded. "I'll do what I can, Mayor Ghastkill. I will need a night to rest first, Mulahey got a nasty hit when my back was turned."

"That's perfectly alright," Berrun said with a laugh. "You've done Nashkel an invaluable service already, Aryana. You owe us no explanations. I'm sure our local innkeeper will be happy to give you a night to rest free of charge."

Imoen leaned over to Jaheira, whispering ever so carefully in her angular ear, "We're still getting paid, right? I'm down to my last ration."

Berrun Ghastkill reached into his cloak and pulled out another scroll. "Here," he said. "Take this note to the temple and they will provide your payment."

Aryana accepted the scroll. "Thank you, you're very kind, Mayor Ghastkill."

"Of course," Berrun smiled. "You've done a great thing for us all today. May the Gods smile on your future endeavors."

"Farewell," Aryana said, inclining her head before turning to her company. "Come. Let's head to the temple and then get ourselves a hot meal for a change."

The two of them stepped out of the Town Hall, heads held high and spirits slightly higher. Even if Aryana's back was still a little sore and her to-do list now longer than she was expecting. They collected their payment from the priests. Nine hundred gold pieces, and an extra four hundred for their diligent work. Then with smiles on their faces they headed right for Nashkel's inn.

However, the moment they stepped inside, a woman at the bar got up and made a beeline straight for them.

"Just fancy my luck seeing you stroll in here, bold as day! I expected a hunt and a chase from the description," she said with a chuckle.

Aryana frowned. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

A grin that could only be described as manic grew on the woman's face as she reached into her cloak and pulled out a sheet of parchment, holding its unfurled contents out for Aryana to see. "This looks like you, doesn't it?" she asked rhetorically.

As if Aryana's stomach could sink any lower. There on that sheet of paper was an almost impressive illustration of herself with the words 'Wanted' in bold red lettering.

And an exceedingly generous bounty. She almost felt flattered. As it was, she had just enough wit in her to look this stranger dead in the eye and say, "No, it doesn't. You might need new eyes."

'Kill her.'

"Cute," the woman sneered. "Well you-"

Whatever Aryana was she would never know, as she quickly drew her longsword and plunged it straight into the woman's stomach just beneath her armor.

The woman gasped, the ugly snarl wiped clean from her face in place of wide eyed shock. Their gazes locked, an eerie calm clashing with a surmounting fear. The bounty hunter tried to say something, only for pooled blood to pour from her lips instead of words. Her legs wobbled hard, unable to support her own weight. As Aryana drew her sword back, she had no choice but to collapse onto the floor.

The entire Inn fell dead silent.

Aryana looked down at the corpse of the would-be assassin and felt a strange feeling of elation. She felt *powerful*. The feeling vanished as quickly as it came and she tore her eyes away from it. "C'mon, let's just... find a room..."

The company looked at her with muted surprise. And... something else. She couldn't quite place it. Worry? Fear maybe? She wasn't sure. Her entire body ached too much to try and gauge nuanced expressions. Nonetheless, they didn't offer any argument.

"Yeah," Imoen nodded, her voice sounding uncomfortably small. "I guess we could all use some rest first."

The innkeeper gave them a room without much complaint. Showing him the bounty letter made it clear she was targeted by assassins. They paid for two rooms. One for Jaheira and Khalid, one for Aryana and Imoen. They didn't even bother trying to get two beds this time. After a quiet meal of stew and bread, they retired to their rooms.

Aryana sat down on the edge of the bed and stared out the window at the muddy street of Nashkel. What was that rush she got looking at the assassin's body? Was she just frustrated at the pain she was in and needed some catharsis? Was she still angry at being played for a fool in the mines and satisfied that another villain didn't get the chance to hurt her?

Was she envisioning that person as Gorion's killer and delighting at the promise of her revenge?

"Hey," a soft voice pulled Aryana from her macabre introspection, her gaze turning to see Imoen leaning over to look at her. "You okay?"

"No..." Aryana said, sitting back against the headboard. "No I'm not."

Imoen crawled after her, sitting to Aryana's left. "It's not just your back bothering you, is it?"

Aryana shook her head. "...I can tell you anything, right? You wouldn't think less of me?"

"Of course, Ary," Imoen said softly, her fingers settling over Aryana's hand before squeezing. "You can trust me with anything. Promise."

Aryana held Imoen's hand and leaned against her. "...Killing that assassin was... exhilarating."

"Oh?" Imoen asked, doing her damndest not to wince or stiffen at Aryana's words. "Why's that?"

"I don't know," Aryana whispered, nuzzling Imoen's hair. "It was like death was... pretty." She winced and pulled her hand from Imoen's, covering her face. "Why would I think that?!"

Conflict stormed in Imoen's mind like nothing else. A part of her didn't feel like now was the right time to tell her. That telling Aryana a truth that she couldn't take back while she was this distressed would only make things worse.

But... keeping it hidden this long was already eating at her. She wasn't Gorion. She couldn't keep secret after secret from Aryana. And the longer she didn't know, the more it would hurt when she found out. She couldn't let that happen.

"...I think I know," she said quietly, reaching into her own pocket.

Aryana lifted her head. "What?"

"Now don't be mad," Imoen said, pulling out a tightly wrapped scroll. "I snuck into Gorion's room and read this before you left. Took it with me. I was waiting for everything to settle

down before I said anything, and well... here..." she held the scroll out to her. "I wasn't trying to keep this from you, I was just... worried about you."

Aryana took the scroll and looked down at it. It was Gorion's alright. Had his seal. Broken. Likely from Imoen. "...Alright, Immy. I believe you," she said as she unfurled the scroll.

Hello, Ary.

If you are reading this, it means I have met an untimely death. I would tell you not to grieve for me, but I feel much better thinking that you would. There are things I must tell you in this letter that I might have told you before. However, if my death came too soon, then I would have never been given the chance. First off, I am not your biological father, for that distinction lies with an entity known as Bhaal. The Bhaal that I speak of is the one you know of as a divinity. In the crisis known as the Time of Troubles, when the gods walked Faerûn, Bhaal was also forced into a mortal shell. He was somehow forewarned of the death that awaited him during this time. For reasons unknown to me, he sought out women of every race and forced himself upon them. Your mother was one of those women, and as you know, she died in childbirth. I had been her friend and, on occasion, lover. I felt obligated to raise you as my own. I have always thought of you as my child, and I hope you still think of me as your father. You are a special child. The blood of the gods runs through your veins. If you make use of our extensive library, you will find that our founder, Alaundo, has many prophecies concerning the coming of the spawn of Bhaal. There are many who will want to use you for their own purposes. One, a man who calls himself Sarevok, is the worst danger. He has studied here at Candlekeep and thus knows a great deal about your history and who you are.

You have told me in the past that you have felt the whispers of your divinity, though you didn't know it as such. I had always been afraid that the spark of Bhaal would affect you, but as you've grown I've found my worries to be unfounded. You have grown into a kind, generous young woman. You'll recall I asked you to be especially nice to Imoen when we brought her to the keep, and you did exactly as I ask and then some. Though I've always noticed you to be a troubled girl, I can rest easy knowing that you will make me proud.

Love

Your father, Gorion

The parchment rattled in Aryana's hands. Her vision blurred several times as tears welled and fell down her cheeks. Her heart was threatening to break her ribs with how hard it was beating. The unease she felt moments ago had grown to a rolling nausea. Her jaw tightened and her mouth became uncomfortably wet. "I-I'm going to be sick."

Imoen jolted slightly, springing to action. In a blur, she snatched a bucket that was resting just beneath the bed's end table. She got it to Aryana in the nick of time as her face disappeared in the bucket and room filled with an ugly retching sound.

Imoen winced, but held the bucket steady. "There you go," she said softly as Aryana retched again. "Get it all out..."

Aryana whimpered, unable to say anything before more of her earlier dinner poured from her mouth. It was horrible. It made her want to die. Want to drown in her own sick and never again trouble the world. Until, finally, it was over. Her head was killing her, her mouth still tasted disgusting but it was over.

Slowly, she pulled her head away from the bucket, ungraciously handing it over to Imoen. She didn't turn to see where her friend had stashed it off to. She was barely aware of the rest of the room, much less the rest of the world.

Imoen returned with a waterskin and gently set it in her lap. "Here," she whispered.

Aryana took the water and rinsed her mouth, then took a few more gulps for good measure. "...You knew? This whole time?"

Imoen nodded, taking Aryana's hand and squeezing it.

"...And you still followed me out of Candlekeep?"

"Of course," Imoen said softly. "I couldn't just stay behind while you were in danger out there."

Aryana trembled, her eyes burning again. "But... I'm-"

"Aryana," Imoen said, delicately cupping Aryana's cheeks. "You're Aryana. You're my best friend. You're Gorion's daughter. You are the most kind, thoughtful woman I've ever met."

Aryana couldn't help the giggle that escaped her lips. "You really lay it on thick..."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Imoen said, matching Aryana's smile with her own. "I am the master of subtlety. How dare you insinuate otherwise?"

Aryana leaned into Imoen's hand. "...Thanks Im," she whispered. "I still don't know what all of this means... but I'm glad you're here."

"I'm always here for you, Ary," Imoen said as her thumbs brushed against Aryana's cheekbones. "It's okay if you're confused or scared right now. We'll figure it out together. Okay?"

Aryana nodded. "Okay." She leaned in and wrapped Imoen in a tight hug. Her nerves were so frayed and yet Imoen was holding her steady.

Imoen eased them both down into the bed, pulling the covers back and over them. A relieved breath escaped her nostrils as they both got comfortable. The truth was out. The secret wasn't eating her alive anymore. And Ary didn't hate her for knowing. Everything was going to be okay. The lamplight in the room began to dim, their oil running out. That was fine. Imoen was relaxed enough to sleep for a week like this. She and Aryana always fit together like puzzle pieces.

The four of them gathered at a table the next morning, and Aryana shared what Imoen had told her, and Gorion's letter. To her surprise, Jaheira was completely unphased.

"Gorion told me when you were very young," she explained. "I wasn't certain if he had told you yet when you came to us. Still I concur with his assessment. You have certainly lived up to his expectations."

Aryana glanced toward the door, where a dark stain still lingered on the wood after the body of the assassin had long been dragged away. "I don't know about that..."

"There is no evil in striking down someone who means you harm, Ary," Jaheira said firmly.

"Yeah, I guess," Aryana said, her tone dismissive. "But... it's another thing entirely to delight in it, right?"

"If finding satisfaction in death was unnatural, the world would not have predators," Jaheira said with a shrug. "And besides, one's nature and one's actions are two very different things."

Aryana gave her a small smile. "...Thanks, Jaheira."

Imoen gave Aryana a hug and kissed her cheek. "I told you."

"That- That said," Khalid interjected, his expression a touch more strained. "I understand if you- if you want to keep this under wraps. Most people won't be- won't be so trusting."

Aryana nodded, wrapping an arm around Imoen. "Yeah. Definitely."

"It's not like it's any of anyone else's business anyway," Imoen said with a smirk. "So, we're off to Beregost today?"

"Assuming you two are still set on seeing this Iron Shortage conspiracy to the end," Jaheira said. "Khalid and I are set on this quest by duty. The same cannot be said of you two."

Aryana and Imoen looked at each other, seemingly conversing with their eyes alone. After a moment, Aryana nodded.

"Yeah. We're with you," Imoen said. "There's still work to do to help the sword coast and we still gotta worry about our mystery assailant. Better to stick together."

Jaheira smiled. "Good. Now Mulahey's letters spoke of a Tranzig, staying at Feldpost's Inn. I've heard of this man. A mage, and a nasty one at that."

"How nasty are we talking?" Imoen asked.

"More conniving and ruthless than his wits allow," Jaheira said dourly. "More than willing to sell an entire village to slavers just for a scrap of power."

"I've heard tales of these kinds of mages. They're power hungry, but they're hungry for a reason. Because they don't have it yet," Aryana said.

“Yes. Gorion had to contend with such mages a great deal in his youth,” Jaheira nodded.

“A great *great* deal,” Khalid added with a wince. “I still have the-the scars.”

“Well, if Gorion can handle them, then we can certainly handle one together,” Imoen said with a smile, making a show of cracking her knuckles. “Which way to Feldpost?”

“We passed it on our way here,” Jaheria chuckled. “It’s an Inn in Beregost.”

“Ah. So two steps forward and one step back,” Imoen hummed. “That’s almost poetic.”

The four of them finished up their meal and stepped out into the cold morning air of Nashkel. Aryana took a deep breath and felt invigorated. The previous night had been an emotional upheaval, and she wasn’t entirely sure what her future held, but her success in the mines as well as Imoen’s comfort made everything feel that little bit less unstable. They had a direction, and she had her best friend at her back. Everything was going to be-

THWACK!

She was completely bulldozed off her feet by a massive, six foot tall man running at top speed along the street, sending her careening face first into the mud.

“Ary!” Imoen squeaked, rushing to kneel down at Aryana’s side. She frantically looked her over for injuries before her gaze darted up to the hulking figure that just tackled her. “Hey! Watch where you’re going!”

The man turned around, revealing a winding blue tattoo arcing across his hairless head and stopping just under his cheek. His eyes widened slightly at the sight before him. “Oh! Oh, I do apologize,” he said in a deep timbre. “I rushed so fast, the world was but a blur just now!”

Aryana pulled herself out of the muck, wiping her jaw and sat up on her knees. There was a bubbling anger in the pit of her stomach at having the wind knocked out of her. Big oafish buffoon, what the hell was he-

She stopped and took a breath. “What’s the hurry, big guy?”

“I am searching for like minded warriors,” he said, pressing a fist into his open palm. “Fellow journeymen who are not afraid to exact justice on an encampment of vile Gnolls! Do you happen to know anyone like that?”

“Well,” Aryana said as Imoen helped her to her feet. “My friends and I just got done cleaning kobolds and undead out of a mine.”

“Oh excellent!” the tattooed man said before clearing his throat and schooling his expression. “I must humbly ask you for your help to help me correct a horrible mistake and save an innocent life from the clutches of those evil creatures.”

Jaheira’s eyes narrowed before looking back to Aryana. “Perhaps we should ask that this stranger explain himself.

“I was getting to that, give me a break I just got slammed into the mud at high speeds,” Aryana said, rubbing her temple. “So what happened, sir?”

“Well, it was a bright and sunny day,” the stranger said. “Spirits were high as I was escorting my charge along the Sword Coast.”

“Your charge?” Aryana asked.

“Indeed. Dynaheir. A brilliant and powerful sorcerer,” the man nodded. “It is my responsibility to safeguard her while she takes this important pilgrimage. But my senses did not sense enemies nearby before we were ambushed and separated.”

“Senses did not sense-” Aryana shook her head. “Okay. So... gnolls?”

“Yes, the hyena men!”

“Okay... what the hell are gnolls doing this far from the savannah?” Aryana asked, turning to Jaheira.

“A fair question,” Jaheira hummed. “These creatures seldom ever leave their hunting grounds without provocation. And they certainly do not snatch people up off the roads in unfamiliar lands.”

“The ‘why’ is for minds smarter than my own,” the bald stranger said. “My only concern is Dynaheir.”

“Okay, do you know where she is?”

“I do!” he said enthusiastically. “Myself and Boo tracked the filthy creatures to an abandoned fort to the southwest.”

Imoen frowned. “Abandoned fort... you don’t mean old Kingsgrave Keep?”

“Perhaps? I am not from these parts,” the man shrugged.

“Well it’s the only fort that could reasonably be abandoned,” Imoen shrugged.

“Well before we get ahead of ourselves,” Aryana said, holding a hand out to the man. “I’m Aryana. This is my best friend Imoen, and our guardians Khalid and Jaheira.”

“Oh, I’m last am I?” Jaheira said, folding her arms.

“A pleasure to meet you all!” the man said with a wide smile. “I am Minsc! Myself and Boo would be honored if you accompanied us on our mission!”

“Boo?” Imoen arched a brow. “You have another companion?”

Her question was answered by a squeak, and then a small brown rodent crawling out of the neck of Minsc’s tunic.

Aryana gasped, her hands covering her mouth as she stared at the creature. By the Gods... “He’s so cute!” she exclaimed, a wide grin on her face.

“Oh, you see Boo? You are already charming the village girls!” Minsc laughed, as Boo scampered down his arm, looking at Aryana curiously.

“Im, look at him!” Aryana exclaimed, gingerly holding out a hand for Boo to sniff. “He’s like a little fuzzy ball of Sunshine!”

Minsc chuckled. “Meet Boo, everyone! The world’s only Miniature Giant Space Hamster!”

“...I’m sorry, what?” Imoen asked.

“Miniature Giant Space Hamster,” Minsc said with a smile.

“...So there’s a non miniature giant space hamster?” Aryana asked.

“Indeed! He hails from beyond the farthest stars!” Minsc beamed. “He says that from above, all of Faerun is round like a stone!”

Imoen leaned in to Aryana’s ear. “Round like a stone? This guy’s nuts.”

“Hey, don’t be mean,” Aryana whispered back.

“Aryana,” Jaheira interjected. “We have business in Beregost. Finding Tranzig before he realized we’re onto him would be wise.”

Aryana’s expression sobered as she looked between her companions and Minsc. A frown tugged at her lips as she realized that the decision indeed fell onto her. Which came first? Untangling this vast conspiracy, or lending a hand to the people asking her for aid? What would Gorion do?

She took a deep breath, considering the questions for a moment longer before turning to Jaheira. “I cannot look a person asking me for help in the eye and tell them to wait. Not when we know a life is on the line.” Her attention turned to bald warrior before her. “Minsc, if we help you rescue your charge, would you both be willing to help us in turn?”

“It would be my honor, an honor I’m certain Dynaheir would join me in!” Minsc said with a bright, goofy smile.

Aryana smiled. “Thank you. I appreciate that. Let’s set off!”

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